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Recovery in a major key

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It isn't often that you run across someone who can be equally enthused about a tribute to Finnish composer Jean Sibelius and a trip to a batting cage.

But Nathaniel Anthony Ayers is such a man.

Because many readers have asked me what my formerly homeless friend is up to, and because United Way's 5K fundraising walk for homeless awareness will be held this Saturday (details below), here's a little update.

Nearly three years into a friendship that began when I saw him in downtown Los Angeles, standing beside his loaded shopping cart and playing a violin with two missing strings, Mr. Ayers is living in a small downtown apartment, doing some janitorial work and still playing music every day for hours on end.

Last week, we had a date for another of our adventures. As usual, he had been calling at 7 a.m. to make sure the trip was still on.

"Good morning, Mr. Lopez," he'd say. "How are Mrs. Lopez, Jeffrey and Andrew Lopez and Miss Caroline Lopez. I hope everyone has a blessed day. I wondered if you've been able to get your hands on the Koussevitzky Double Bass Concerto, the Dragonetti Double Bass Concerto, and are we still going bowling and to a batting cage this week?"

The requests and the phone calls are a relief to me. Mr. Ayers didn't check in as regularly when he wasn't doing particularly well earlier this year. For a couple of months in the spring, he was having frequent run-ins with the staff and fellow members of Lamp Community, a skid row mental health agency that has been his home for almost two years.

But then he suddenly turned it around and became all the more eager to go places and do things. I'd say a late-summer trip to the Hollywood Bowl was the turning point. The L.A. Phil performed works by Dvorak and Prokofiev, and Mr. Ayers was able to chat with two of his pals in the orchestra -- cellists Peter Snyder and Ben Hong.

Several weeks later, we went to a USC Trojans football game, where I suspect Mr. Ayers' cheers made the difference in a narrow victory for the home team. But I've never seen him more excited about anything than he was about a visit from a Juilliard classmate he had not seen in more than 35 years.

Joseph Russo, a bass player and composer who lives in Connecticut, had come to town to watch the La Mirada Symphony Orchestra perform a triple flute concerto he wrote. Andree Baumler, another bass player and former classmate at Juilliard, is principal bass in the La Mirada orchestra.

"There he is," Mr. Ayers said when he saw his old friend walk into the La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts.

Does he look the same? I asked.

"Yes, but more fatherly," said Mr. Ayers.

They shook hands and spoke as if they'd never been apart, talking about music and former teachers.

Russo, who was called to the stage by conductor David Stenske, told the audience his concerto was written for three friends who regret not having more time together. And by chance, he said, he was having his own happy reunion with long-lost friends in Southern California.

Mr. Ayers so enjoyed the concert and the reception that followed, he asked me if he could audition for the orchestra. It's something to work toward, I told him. In truth, he'd need to be much further along in his recovery, and to put it mildly, Mr. Ayers has developed such an aversion to doctors that he hasn't been willing to seek medical treatment.

Music is still his best medicine, and a day after the La Mirada concert, Mr. Ayers sat next to Mr. Russo at Disney Hall as the L.A. Phil played Sibelius' First and Third symphonies. He joked and held forth before and afterward, and not two days after Russo flew back home, Mr. Ayers began calling my house in the morning, asking when he'd see his friend again.

I didn't know, and I couldn't just make up a date or he'd hold me to it. What I could do, though, was take him to a batting cage.

"When was the last time you swung a bat?" I asked as we pulled up to Batcade on Victory Boulevard in Burbank last week.

"I hit some balls a few years ago on Sepulveda," he said.

"Well, let's see what you can do."

We bought some tokens, and got baseball bats and helmets.

"You go first," I told Mr. Ayers.

He stood in the batter's box, 56 years old, but as game as the day he was 15 and playing ball in Cleveland. Bat cocked. Eyes focused. On his head was a bright red batter's helmet, which clashed a bit with his bright yellow crossing guard vest, on the back of which he had written "SKID ROW."

The pitching machine sized him up, whirred and groaned, and heaved a nasty fast one at him, low and inside.

Mr. Ayers stepped into it confidently, whipped his bat around and connected solidly.

The ball came off the bat like a rocket, screaming down the right field line. It would have been a stand-up double, no doubt.

"Yo, Joe Torre!" I called out loud enough for the new Dodger manager to hear. "I've got a prospect for you."

Mr. Ayers didn't hit everything, but for half an hour, he connected regularly and out-hit me by a mile, smiling like a kid all the while. And who knew he was a switch-hitter?

On our way to lunch, I dialed his aunt and uncle's house in Cleveland, knowing that his father -- who lives in a retirement community in Las Vegas -- was visiting there. Mr. Ayers hasn't seen much of his dad in decades, and my friend sounded as though he was still trying to win his father's affection and respect. He called him "father," "sir" and "Mr. Ayers."

"Well," he said, "I became a full-time musician, and I've got my job over at Lamp, where I clean up each day and take the trash out. I show up every day for work, sir. I earn my keep."

My friend grew a little more distant over lunch, and then got testy at a music shop later. He was upset that they didn't have the sheet music he wanted, and I tensed up, the way I do when I don't know what's gotten hold of him or how long he'll be in its grip.

We have our ups and our downs.

We go on.

Many months ago, I learned to accept him as he is, and I realized there were as many rewards as challenges.

"I'll find the music you want," I told him, reminding him, as well, that we've got a Lakers game coming up soon.

"I hope you're not upset," he said.

"Don't forget to call," I answered.

"I will, Mr. Lopez." And of course, he has, saying thanks and wishing us a blessed day.